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### Interview with Marvene Chambers

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*Fort Hays State University*

Marvene Teeters Chambers

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## CHAPTER II: MARVENE TEETER CHAMBERS AND EDUCATION

### **School Days**

Marvene Teeter Chambers started her 39 year teaching career at the age of 18 in a one-room schoolhouse located three miles south and two and one quarter mile west of Haddam, Kansas. In the same country school that she had attended as a child she was now responsible for the education of 14 students, ranging in ages from 6 to 19 years. All levels from beginner to 8th grade were represented during Chambers' first school term. Unlike today, she was responsible for teaching all subject areas, including art and music. Chambers served as the school custodian, playground supervisor, and sole instructor at District #44, Happy Hollow, in 1936 and 1937. She then taught one year at the one-room schoolhouse, Bethlehem, located in eastern Republic County, Kansas. She then completed terms in the country schools of Howard, Horseshoe, and Stevenson in Washington County. Chambers was one of 27 applicants for the Happy Hollow position in 1936. Being a graduate of Happy Hollow, she was given the opportunity to teach for \$35.00 a month. With the country in the depths of depression, Chambers was happy to have a job and one that paid well, at that. Some of her friends from Normal School Training took jobs that paid only \$27.50 a month. During the first four months of her school term, she stayed with her parents and walked to Happy Hollow. After that, her family moved into Haddam, where Marvene continued to teach at Happy Hollow, driving five miles to school on bumpy, dirt roads.

The school day officially started at 9:00 in the morning. For Chambers, the process of preparing the school for the children began much earlier. She was responsible

for starting the fire and cleaning the schoolhouse. On cold days she was responsible for starting the fire in the wood burning stove used to heat the schoolhouse. When lucky, Chambers was able to bank the fire the previous evening and had good coals to work with the next morning. If the fire went out, it took all morning for the school building to warm. At 8:30, the school bell rang to indicate to all the children that it was time to think about going to school. Another bell sounded at 8:55 to bring the students into the school building. The older boys loved to ring the school bell. Chambers remarked that they often pulled the ropes so hard that the bell turned over and she would have to send one boy up to the school's attic to right the bell. The school day began with all the children leaving their coats and lunches in the cloak room. During the winter, children often left their lunches by the fire so that the lunches would not freeze.

After the Pledge of Allegiance, the children would sit down to work. No longer was prayer part of the day. Prayers were still said at Thanksgiving and Christmas and biblical passages used in programs, but after Madeline O'Hare and the Supreme Court decision that dictated the separation between school and state, prayer and scripture reading were no longer part of the country school curriculum.

Chambers was responsible for all curriculum content at Happy Hollow. She followed the Typical Course of Study handbook when possible. The Typical Course of Study was a thick volume for each subject area, listing the content to be covered by each grade level. During the 1936 term, she was required to teach social studies for the first time. Chambers had no text for social studies; she relied on magazines, newspapers, and The Typical Course of Study to supplement her social studies curriculum. Although it

was difficult to teach at the beginning, social studies quickly became a favorite subject for Chambers. She was interested in the study of the world and its people, how they lived and their culture.

During the morning, children studied mathematics, science, reading, writing, and spelling. With the wide variety of ages and levels, many children had individualized instruction. Chambers believed that students learned at many different levels during the day. If a student finished with assignment, he or she listened to recitations by the older students. Many times peer tutoring was used. When the older students finished their work, they sometimes were sent out into the hallway to work with the younger students on reading recitation or spelling words. A student may have had five minutes each morning in which Chambers would hear his or her recitation. She called up her 4th grade readers and they came to the recitation bench along one wall. When they finished, she called the next group. This continued until all classes had recited from their readers.

At 10:30 and 1:30, students were released for recess. Recess was a break for both Chambers and the students. She supervised, and on occasion, joined in their games. In pleasant weather, the children played games like Gray Wolf, Steal Sticks, and Andi-Over. Gray Wolf was a version of hide-and-go-seek. In Steal Sticks, sides were chosen with a base designated in the middle of the field. Piles of sticks were placed on each end of the base and each team would try to steal the other team's sticks. Players that were caught were sent to "prison". A team won if they stole all the other team's sticks or if they captured all the other team's players. Andi-over was played with teams who threw a ball over the schoolhouse roof. If an opposite team member caught the ball, they would run

to the other side and tag a player for their side. When the weather brought snow, the students of Happy Hollow still played outside. Fox and Geese was a wintertime favorite.

Lunch time brought the Chambers and the students a one-hour break. A ceramic wash basin was located in the cloak room for students to wash up before lunch. The typical school lunch varied according to each family and its number of children. Some children brought very elaborate lunches, while the others brought only a bread and honey sandwich. One special treat was a store bought cookie. Chambers remembered when she and her sister brought cookies with pink icing and a marshmallow center in their lunch pails. Chambers, still a student at that time, recalled that her cookie always disappeared before lunch. She decided to catch the thief. She bored a small hole in the bottom of the cookie and poured in Cayenne red pepper. It did not take long to spot the culprit. Another treat for Chambers' students was hot soup during the winter. In the morning, a soup bone and water were placed in a kettle that was attached to the pot-bellied stove with baling wire. At recess, students brought potatoes, carrots, onions, and whatever else they found at home to add to the soup. By noon the soup was done, and Chambers and the students had a warm meal, but it was difficult to make it through the morning with the wonderful smell of the soup wafting throughout the building. They did this several times during the winter months.

School dismissed at 4:00 for the students, but Chambers still had another hour or two in which she had to clean the school and plan for the next day. She often took two hours worth of grading home with her at night. It was her philosophy that if a student has

put in the time to complete a paper, she should grade it. The school day seemed long but Chambers loved the challenge and the responsibility of being a one-room school teacher.

### **Golden Rule Days**

Being a one-room school teacher was difficult. Not only was Chambers responsible for many levels of instruction, she had to deal with discipline of students that were many times the same age. Often, the students had attended school with Marvene, and they thought of her as a peer instead of as their teacher. At the beginning, these attitudes made discipline a little rough for her. She told her mother that she was ready to quit. At her mother's insistence, she remained the term and went to talk to two members of the school board whose children made up a bulk of the enrollment. After the fathers assured Chambers of their support and approval, they told her that if she felt it necessary, she should spank the unruly student and they would see to it that the child would be spanked again at home. She followed their suggestions and never had any more trouble. Chambers had to deal differently with one student, her sister. Velda Teeter did not like to have her sister "boss" her, but she soon became accustomed to her older sister as a teacher and not a classmate.

Over the years, Chambers' form of discipline did not change much. She was strict but fair. One situation in the one-room schoolhouse that did influence behavior was the outhouse. Students, mainly older boys, used this excursion as an excuse to smoke. On the way back to schoolhouse, they grabbed wild onions and ate them to hide the smell of smoke, but they could not fool Chambers.

Other forms of discipline were really teaching strategies of Chambers. She discouraged tardiness by making students want to return to class on time. Many times she read aloud, “straight up at one o’clock”, and if a student was late, he or she missed that part of the story. Very few students missed Heidi, or in later years, Old Yeller and Son of Old Yeller. Her students remembered her with fondness for her quick wit and consistent discipline. “I’ll be on you like ugly on an ape” and “I’ll be all over you like Old Yeller” were two of her favorite expressions to remind children to behave. These expressions were fondly remembered by many former students.

Cheating was another concern for Chambers.. Many times she would “catch” a student reading a book rather than doing the assigned homework. It was hard to discipline someone for reading. She was very careful in handling a situation in which she thought a student had been dishonest. She warned that students can be hurt for a lifetime if falsely accused of cheating.

The hard work and discipline paid off for many of Chambers’ students. Students were required to pass county wide exams with a minimum score of 70% in order to be promoted to the eighth grade or on to high school. Chambers would schedule extra work sessions for them, one half hour before and after school. When it was difficult for some students to pass the exam, Chambers put in extra time and effort to help these students when they retook the county test. It was a proud moment for Chambers, her students and their parents on county graduation day.

Chambers was concerned with the manners of her students. She encouraged use of the wash basin and each student was required to bring a towel from home. At the end

of the week, she sent the towels home with the children to be washed. In later years, after moving to the town school, she advocated and taught table manners to her students. She taught many children to chew with their mouths closed and to keep their elbows off the table. She was a stickler when it came to proper and appropriate use of language and many children were reprimanded when they chose to overlook that rule.

In her words, Chambers said, "Children like to be disciplined." She felt that they were proud of a quiet place to work. Even on "bad" days, when she raised her voice, they would settle down to do their work. Then too, students knew when not to cross that line.

### **Miracle Worker**

As with many small school systems today, the one-room schoolhouse did not run on the laurels of the teacher alone. Many people were involved in its administration at the local, county, and state level. The one-room schoolhouse was advised by a local school board. A budget was set and each family felt a responsibility for their school system. Often teachers would board with the students' families in return for a portion of their salary. Chambers recalled that she was paid very well in 1936. Her first teaching job at Happy Hollow was salaried at \$35.00 a month, with a \$5.00 a month increase for each year taught. This was well above the \$27.50 netted by many of her classmates.

At Happy Hollow, families often contributed to the library at the school. Although no official library was ever designated, Chambers remembers a good collection of resources obtained through the donations by the schools patrons. In later years, the county did support a central library that included the Central Library Reading Circle,



through which schools could purchase library books. When social studies was introduced into the curriculum, Chambers recalled many resources being supplied from students' homes, although a textbook was not formally adopted for many years.

A good teacher made use of any aides and resources that were available.

According to Chambers, those aides were few. She remembered that, as a child at Happy Hollow, on Fridays she was allowed one piece of clean, white paper to complete an art project. The teaching aides available to Chambers in her early years at Happy Hollow consisted of a few pull-down maps and a big Webster's Dictionary. One year in social studies, Chambers drew the world on the painted cement floor of the school. Students studied continents, oceans, rivers, and land regions by drawing in the rivers and mountain ranges, labeling the countries and important sites, and by standing on the continents. This was one memorable geography lesson. Most of the curriculum was driven by the Typical Course of Study.

Although physical aides were limited, teachers in the one-room schoolhouses of this time did have professional support available to them. Each fall, before school started, Washington County would hold County Institute for all teachers. Each teacher went to Washington, the county seat, and attended a week long seminar. At the seminar, they listened to lecturers, traded patterns, and shared ideas. Chambers found this a very helpful teaching tool. This idea of a county institute continued in later years with a county meeting that consisted of a banquet supper followed by special meetings that addressed new ideas. State meetings were held at four or five locations around Kansas for educators. These two-day sessions gave Chambers the opportunity to hear wonderful

speakers. Topics ranged from the problem child to discipline in the classroom. Washington County also published the *Washington County Teachers Journal*. It contained information on state teacher examinations, teacher assignments and salaries, school enrollments and budgets, and school news. A January 1942 issue of this journal included an advertisement for teacher resource magazines available at a Greenleaf, Kansas drug store.

Special needs of children in the classroom were addressed matter-of-factly. If a student had a problem reading or hearing, that student was moved to a different location. Chambers made the attempt to “win over” difficult students. The parents of one young boy threatened to take him out of school if he did not straighten up. At this time, Chambers was teaching at the country school, Stephens, and vowed to win over the boy. Every day she walked with him and encouraged his attendance and behavior. She found out later that the boy was exposed to an abusive situation. At the end of the term, his parents came and thanked Chambers for her interest and commitment to their son.

### **The Little White School House**

In the fall of 1882, Stephen F. and Louisa Percival sold a one-acre tract of land to the state. This became School District #44. This land, commencing at the northwest corner of the south half of the northwest quarter of section five, Grant, Township, in Washington County, Kansas became known as Happy Hollow School. A schoolhouse was built at the location 3 1/2 miles west and 2 1/4 miles south of Haddam to serve the community of families in the area. The structure of the Happy Hollow school was wood and was renovated into the Haddam Church of God parsonage and moved into town.

This school once served as many as 60 students, some as old as 21 and 22 years of age. Older boys generally only went to school in the wintertime, when they could be spared from farmwork. No one was quite sure how Happy Hollow got its name, but former teacher, Lora Teeter, commented that she felt “it was rightly named, as to the location and the many happy times enjoyed there!” Chambers remembered the schoolhouse as cozy. The classroom faced the north. Four windows on the east and four on the west provided natural light for the students. The windows had blinds and white curtains that made the appearance of the classroom more comfortable. Students at Happy Hollow decorated the windows cheerfully for each holiday. The school housed a cloakroom where children hung their coats. To wash before lunch, students used the washbasin that sat in the cloakroom. The teacher’s desk was located at the front of the classroom, surrounded by blackboards at the front and the left side. A picture of George Washington and an American flag hung at the back of the schoolhouse. The school library collection was kept in a large oak library cabinet with glass doors. A recitation bench was located at the front of the schoolhouse. Four rows of seats were available for students. The desks had hinged seats so that the teacher could turn them up to sweep. Once a week, Chambers used a sweeping compound to oil the wooden floor.

Running water was never a part of the Happy Hollow school district. Happy Hollow had a well, but it was not used because of snakes and unsanitary conditions. Chambers and the students had to carry water to the schoolhouse. Two by two, students were chosen to walk the quarter mile trip and brought freshwater back to the schoolhouse. During her first year, Chambers and her students drank from the same

bucket and dipper, but the next year they were afforded the luxury of a “drinking fountain”, a ceramic crock.

The heating system at Happy Hollow was a big wood burning stove located in the southwest corner of the schoolhouse. Due to inadequate ventilation, students were often smoked out in the winter time. Chambers banked the fire at night in hopes that it would be easier to start a fire in the morning. When she did not succeed, it was noon before the schoolhouse was warm enough to be comfortable. In the winter time, students would use the stove to keep dinner pails from freezing.

Animals took to the Happy Hollow schoolhouse on occasion. Chambers remembered how a family of skunks, a mother and her five babies, took up residence underneath the schoolhouse. Chambers and the students became used to the smell, but were not as welcome when they returned home for the evening. The unpleasant “aroma” preceeded their return home. A group of farmers used car exhausts to drive the animals away.

Chambers did not have a telephone in any one-room school except for Bethlehem in Republic County. She did not concern herself with emergencies or the thought of needing a telephone until one boy broke his leg playing hide-n-seek. She sent his brother home to get his parents. When the brother returned and announced that the parents were gone for the day, Chambers had no choice but to send all the students home and take the injured boy to the doctor. She drove the boy to Mahaska, had the doctor set the leg, and drove back to wait over an hour with the boy until his parents returned home. She often sent a child home when he or she became ill without contacting parents.

When she did have a telephone at Bethlehem, she called parents quite often. This backfired when one little boy requested that Chambers call his family every day around 11:00. He complained of sickness and often vomited. The father talked to Chambers after this had gone on for some time. He told Chambers that the boy did not like math and was making himself sick. If she told the boy that she would spank him if he got sick before math, the father assured Chambers that the nonsense would stop. It did!

One part of the school building structure concerned Chambers. For extra light, the schoolhouse contained kerosene light fixtures. She worried about the fixtures and the safety of the students. The fixtures were seldom used during pleasant days, but during the winter and at special school functions, the lamps were lit. To her knowledge, no accident involving the kerosene lamps was ever reported.

### **Training**

Marvene Teeters graduated from Happy Hollow in 1934. Normal training was given in high school. Classes went to country schools to observe and to substitute teach. Chambers maintained that this was the best preparation that she had in her professional career. After completing her normal training and passing the state teacher exams in 1936, she was ready for her first job at the young age of 18.

In 1936, the country was in the midst of a depression and people were happy with any job. Twenty-seven people applied for the teaching position at Happy Hollow that year. Because she was a former student and an area product, Chambers was given the position. She was in charge of the education for 14 young people ranging in ages from 6 to 19. She was salaried at \$35.00 a month and contracted to an eight month term. She

then left Happy Hollow to teach in Republic County. In 1940, she returned to teach another term at Happy Hollow for an incredulous \$65.00 a month.

Chambers taught for five years before marrying in 1941. After 1941, she renewed her teaching certificate. At that time, a country school teacher recertified by obtaining eight hours every two years. Chambers took her hours through correspondence courses from Kansas State University. After she moved into the town school in Haddam, she thought that she would be set with a 60-hour certificate, but she had to return to school and get a degree. If she did not, her wages would have been cut. From that time, every hour that Chambers took was a combination of summer school, night school, and Saturday school. She went to summer school for seven consecutive summers and received her degree in 1974 from Emporia State University.

### **Happy days**

The one-room schoolhouse served as the focal point for the community and the people that it served. Many schools served as a church on Sundays. The Bethlehem school doubled as a church and Sunday school, which explains the cross on the school belfry. Many happy times were had when people of the community gathered for spelling bees, box and pie suppers, and school programs. A favorite program was the Christmas program. It marked the end of the first semester of the school term and gave students and the teacher a well-deserved break. Chambers enjoyed the programs and working with the children. During her first year, she worked particularly hard to feature the talents of her students. She made crepe paper dresses with tinsel around the dresses for her “angels” and even took the lamp and curling iron to fix students’ hair before the performance.

Programs were especially important for the children who participated and they worked eagerly to learn their parts. Programs were also presented at Thanksgiving and in the Spring.

Other community events at Happy Hollow were the box and pie suppers. These suppers were held to raise money for the school, usually for library books. Young girls put homemade goodies into a pretty, decorated box. Young men bid up to \$4 and \$5, sometimes higher, for these boxes. The bidder and the young girl would then have a picnic lunch. During pie suppers, homemade pies were auctioned to make extra money for the district. Both of these events were usually held after a program and were a source of fun for the entire community.

Even the school day could bring a little extra excitement for Chambers and the students at Happy Hollow. Every Friday, a spelling bee would be held to crown the champion speller for the week. Sometimes the community would be invited to an evening of competition. Spelling and geography bees provided great entertainment to the members of the community. Another exciting event was the unexpected visit by someone. Chambers could count on the county superintendent to visit at least once a year, but at least his visits were expected. One day Chambers heard a noise and turned from her students working at the board. In her chair sat a large, foreign looking man. After her initial fright, Chambers demanded, "Who are you and what are you doing here?" It was Dr. Bitzer, the county physician. He had come to check the health of the children. Chambers then proceeded to reprimand Dr. Bitzer for scaring her and warned

that he had better never scare anyone like that again! That, though, is exactly what Dr. Bitzer did to one-room school teachers time and time again.

Chambers' fondest memory of her teaching career comes during her years at Happy Hollow school. Walter Zenger, father of seven boys, all students of Chambers, had a team of horses and Chambers' father had a bobsled. One day, she surprised her students by calling off classes and taking them out to sled. The older students had sleds that they hitched behind the bobsled and Chambers wrapped the smaller students in warm furs. What fun they had that day!

### **Golden Years**

People have romanticized the life of a one-room school teacher, but in reality, it was hard work. Discipline was strict and a rigid code of conduct and morals followed the teacher. Still, many teachers endured and excelled at the teaching profession in a one-room schoolhouse. Marvene Chambers attended the one-room schoolhouse in the same district where her father attended as a boy. She later returned as a teacher at Happy Hollow District #44 and saw the school close in 1948 with an enrollment of two students. Many things contributed to the close of the school and many like it throughout the state. What began as a very large community at Happy Hollow dwindled through the years, as did most rural communities. Farmsteads on every 80 or 160 acre section became a thing of the past, as one or two land-owners would buy the surrounding area. With the larger farmstead and declining population, schools started closing. Some country schools held on until the 1960's, but the outcome was inevitable. Mandatory school consolidation



ended the chapter on one-room schoolhouses in Kansas education. Left are the memories and stories of teachers like Marvene Chambers and her many students..